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ABSTRACT

The dimensions of the social problem of street children in developing countries is being recognized and the need for social action is being addressed. The tone of recent policy papers, however, is one of sympathy rather than of empathy. This sympathetic stance is prone to distortion and misrepresentation and may result in social action which is short-sighted and counterproductive. The failure to achieve empathic understanding of street children has resulted in a focus on weakness and pathology, ignoring the signs of strength and resiliency these children also possess. The sympathetic posture of recent policy papers has falsely assumed a great deal of knowledge about street children. Misconceptions exist in the definitions of street children, in the language and perspective applied to street children, and in the etiology of the condition of street children. Overcoming the lack of knowledge about the problem of street children is fundamental to informed social policy. Advocacy and applied research both play important roles in social policy formation, but reasonable distinctions between the two must be maintained. Policymakers must rely on researchers, clinicians, and advocates alike to inform policy formulation, while recognizing that the approach of each requires careful scrutiny. (NB)

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ABANDONED CHILDREN RECONSIDERED: PREVENTION, SOCIAL POLICY AND THE TROUBLE WITH SYMPATHY

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ABANDONED CHILDREN RECONSIDERED:

PREVENTION, SOCIAL POLICY AND THE TROUBLE WITH SYMPATHY

The phenomenon of so-called "abandoned" or "street" children in the developing countries has begun to receive increasing attention in both the popular press and in social science journals (Hodge, 1983; Riding, 1984; Hollnsteiner and Tacon, 1983; Felsman, 1984). In addition, recent commitments of resources have been made by international agencies, (UNICEF, in particular) supporting joint efforts with specific governments to address this pressing social problem in their respective countries. The need for social action has long been evident and the emergence of these collaborative efforts is indeed welcome. However, the tone of recent social policy papers contains an underlying attitude that suggests the need for careful reflection on the part of policymakers. This attitude is one of sympathy and is often found within the "helping professions", clinicians, researchers, advocates and policymakers alike. On the surface it appears quite benign, yet the trouble with sympathy begins to emerge when contrasted to an attitude that is more genuinely empathic.

This paper will be an examination of the distinction between sympathy and empathy as reflected in social policy vis-a-vis street children. I will discuss the dilemma of confusing advocacy with applied research and will argue that the sympathetic posture runs a serious risk of generating social action that is short-sighted, counterproductive and not likely to be in the best interests of those it sincerely intends to benefit. My intent is to introduce a cautionary note, suggesting

that serious scrutiny of policy formulation now will yield more positive results for street children and their families.

Sympathy vs. Empathy

The terms sympathy and empathy are often used as if they were interchangeable when, in fact, they are not. As Greenson (1960), and others (Buie, 1981; Schafer, 1959), have defined it, empathy is an emotional and cognitive knowing that allows one to share the feelings or experience of another person. As a temporary condition achieved through a dynamic process, empathy is essential in the development of trust. Maintenance of empathic understanding is based on respect for "the other" and is dependent upon ongoing dialogue to monitor the accuracy of perception.

Sympathy, on the other hand, is usually inaccurate. Tending to assume knowing rather than to know, sympathy distorts. Moreover, sympathy is often communicated with unrecognized arrogance, so that it is bestowed rather than achieved. Pity and condescension are its first cousins. Though at times based upon conscious identification with a particular person or group, it is most often an unconscious process and therefore, of a more permanent nature than empathy.

The sympathetic posture is reflected by words that evoke feelings (e.g. vagrant, helpless, and powerless). This is a language of advocacy. Such adjectives engender a push for immediate action, often phrased in terms of rescuing or saving. Certainly, advocacy has an important role to play in social policy formulation, but all too often it is represented and

accepted as "the truth," and may produce uninformed social actions that yield unfortunate results.

Thus with respect to the issue of street children, policy statements that talk of "a Brotherhood of the Abandoned" (Tacon, 1981:40) or make reference to "guidance by `front-liners' who really know where reality lies" (Tacon, 1981:134) necessarily raise concerns for applied researchers. Such a stance assumes a great deal of knowledge and leads, I believe, to the use of language that distorts the complexity of this serious social problem. It is not a sufficient basis on which to build sound social policy.

Defining the Problem

Fundamental to informed social policy is overcoming our lack of knowledge of the problem. UNICEF recently estimated that there are some forty million street children in Latin America, with numbers projected as high as twenty million in Brazil alone. Similarly, a recent UNICEF publication suggests that "these forty million little people are living in the streets entirely or virtually without families" (Tacon, 1981:37). The implicit assumption in these figures and statements is that these children are all very much alike, that is, that they are living in the streets in the same way and for similar reasons. This assumption arises because there is no generally agreed upon definition of the "street child" in the few documented studies that exist (Srivastava, 1963; Gutierrez, 1972; Tellez, 1976; Pineda, 1978; Felsman, 1981). Elsewhere, (1981a, b, 1984) I noted the marked diversity among these children and the significant difference in both the etiology of their condition and the nature and rhythm of

their daily street life.

What emerged from my own work in Cali, Colombia (drawn from a sample of three hundred children) was the existence of three rather distinct subgroups of street children. The first, and often mistakenly assumed to be the largest group, was comprised of children who had actually been orphaned or physically abandoned. In fact, it was actually the smallest group, representing some seven percent of the sample. The abandoned child may often be one the family is least able to care for, perhaps one who suffers some deformity or neurological impairment. Though such impairments can initially be an asset in begging, the disability gradually becomes burdensome and finally unbearable; the child is left to fend for himself.

The second and largest category of Cali's street children, representing some 61 percent of the sample, consisted of children who actively maintained family connections. Making regular or sporadic contact with their homes within the squatter settlements or inquilinatos (over-crowded rooming houses near the center city), they circulate, often spending most of their time in the streets. Most spend the day pursuing money or goods to be brought home after nightfall. Others, involved in a wider street life, may be away from home for days at a time.

The third group, representing some 32 percent of the sample, were children who exist at an extreme, living in the streets without the traditional institutional support of family, school, church or state. They are abandoning, not abandoned, children. These children appear to have made an active, willful departure

from home. Having broken primary ties with their families, they are essentially responsible for their own physical and emotional survival. These children display qualities hard to describe, but to the practiced eye, clearly recognizable in their physical appearance and movement, patterns of peer relations and survival strategies. These qualities set them apart from the majority of street children.

Policy papers that make sweeping reference to "millions of little people" (Tacon, 1981:37) and unhesitatingly make the transition to statements about those "who plan the lives of little people" (Tacon, 1981:39) are inadequate. I think we have a good deal to learn about who these children are and how they see themselves. It is crucial that we specify which "little people" we are talking about. Diversity in etiology, daily life and self-regard all suggest the necessity for similar diversity in approaches in social policy.

Language and Perspective

By definition, the study of "social problems" has long relied upon a language of what is "wrong," "dysfunctional," "impaired," or "inadequate." In regard to the fields of psychology and psychiatry, Lois Murphy (1967:2) pointed out:

> In applying ways of thinking formulated out of the experience with broken adults, we were slow to see how a language of adequacy to meet life's challenges could become a subject matter of psychological science. Thus, there are thousands of studies of maladjustment for each one that deals directly with ways of managing life's problems with personal strength and adequacy. The

language of problems, difficulties, inadequacies, or antisocial or delinquent conduct or of ambivalence and anxiety is familiar. We know that there are devices for correcting, bypassing or overcoming threats; but for the most part these have not been directly studied.

The orientation towards street children reflects a similar pattern. The language is of "rebels" and "delinquents" who are "vagrant" and in need of "rehabilitation." The focus has been almost exclusively on the children's weaknesses with descriptions that overemphasize vulnerability and pathology. The term "vagrant" often implies a picture of aimless wandering. Yet the daily lives of most street children reflect patterns of behavior that are quite organized, indeed, are goal directed. Moreover, the word "rehabilitation" assumes a disorder exists. It takes the perspective that these children's behavior is fundamentally maladaptive. This emphasis on rehabilitation distances the discussion of social policy from the realm of primary prevention. Previously, I have urged a broader, contextual approach to these children that gives serious consideration to the strength, resiliency and healthy adaptation demonstrated in certain elements of their daily coping strategies. Such a stance is more apt to draw upon such terms as "support", "protection" or "opportunity". It is an approach that is essentially proactive and more in harmony with a primary prevention model.

Similarly, policy papers that depict Latin America's migrants as an "army of Quixotes" (Hollnsteiner and Tacon, 1983:17), that describe the families of Latin America's squatter settlements as being nothing more than "crisis ridden," or that

suggest that "urban misery knows no culture it only destroys it" (Hollnsteiner and Tacon, 1983:16, 20) are resting upon the language of advocacy, based more upon the arrogance of a sympathetic viewpoint than genuine effort at empathic understanding. Moreover, this sympathetic viewpoint implies that these children, having nothing, should be grateful for being rescued.

A more empathic respectful approach, on the other hand, would consider the fact that regardless of the pain and deprivation inherent in street life, children who are voluntarily or coercively taken from the streets are, in fact, giving up a known way of life. Policymakers cannot afford to ignore the loyalty and peer support that exist in these children's group and gang life nor to minimize the important sense of physical freedom they possess. Many official "rehabilitation" programs in Colombia which have relied on institutionalizing street children have experienced extremely high runaway rates and, by their own account, have had little success with their stated mission.

In contrast, street children, in their own words, have offered guidance to those who would help them. A "Street Arab" in turn-of-the-century New York City told John Needham (1884:426), "I know them kind of places, yer can't do what yer like, or go in and out; they lock the doors an there y'are stuck fast. What I want to know is can a fellow go when he likes." A more recent quote of street children in Colombia is similar and goes a step further, guiding the would-be policymaker along empathic lines. "You can create a thousand institutions but

you'll never hold him because he loves his freedom and adventure more than blankets and good manners. But all the world can be transformed and a new man born in him when you say, `brother give me your hand.'"(Felsman, 1981a:174)

Etiology

Recent social policy literature (Tacon, 1981; Hollnsteiner and Tacon, 1983) regarding street children suggests external, environmental circumstances as the sole etiology of their condition. Without question, factors such as poverty, rural to urban migration, civil strife and family violence play a central role in the genesis of street children. However, such a narrow view does not account for those children who have been exposed to a similar fate and circumstance and are not in the streets. To achieve a more sound social policy, we must face the complexity of this phenomenon, particularly the intrinsic factors of character, personality and individual differences these children bring into the streets with them.

Advances in developmental psychology have helped us realize that the child's mind is not the tabula rasa Locke envisioned. Recent work of Thomas and Chess (1980), on the multifaceted nature of "temperament" and its "goodness of fit" with a particular caretaker in a specific environment suggests a much more dynamic process. Piaget's (1952) work on cognitive development portrays the child as an active agent in the world, seeking out interaction, accommodating and assimilating elements in the environment. Similarly, theorists of ego psychology such as Erik Erikson (1950) and Robert White (1959) have helped us appreciate important sources of the child's internal motivation.

The natural press within children for competent, industrious engagement with the environment and their natural strivings for increased mastery and autonomy require careful consideration. Attention to the complexity and diversity in the lives of street children will lead to more thorough, empathic understanding and, ultimately, more effective social action. The general tendency to put aside much of what we know about child development will serve only to reinforce the sympathetic stance which sees the child as nothing more than a "powerless victim."

Advocacy vs. Applied Research

An important distinction needs to be made between advocacy on the one hand and applied research on the other. Both play important roles in social policy formulation but are not synonymous and neither should be mistaken for the other. Erik Erikson has referred to "disciplined subjectivity," a posture in participant observation in which the researcher makes a genuine effort to account for himself as a variable in the results of his work. This is a stance guided by empathy rather than sympathy, as it requires significant self-scrutiny and is based upon ongoing dialogue as a way of refining perception. In a similar vein, Erikson (1964) has called for a necessary distinction between "actuality" and "reality," insisting that we establish the actuality -- the facts of a person's life, setting or situation -- as well as the "reality" of that person. For Erikson, "reality" is what the "actuality" means and feels like to the "subject" of inquiry. It is a call for contextual understanding. It guards against the overidentification through

which the sympathetic stance fosters that faulty "assumption of knowing" another's experience which can result in serious distortion and misrepresentation.

A recent paper on urban migration in developing countries that addressed the subject of street children (Hollnsteiner and Tacon, 1983:24) suggested that "social science researchers need to throw off the obsolete assumption that the scientific approach to studying human behavior demands an objective, personally-uninvolved investigator." There are many pathways to the study of human behavior, including those more quantitative and experimental in nature. The most perplexing part of the quoted statement and of the article in general, is the lack of recognition of a longstanding tradition of social science, including the diverse but inter-related fields of psychology, psychiatry, sociology and anthropology based upon "participant observation." Embodiment of this tradition ranges from the reliance on "direct clinical observation" in the early work of Anna Freud (1951) and Jean Piaget (1952) to the work of such noted social researchers as Erik Erikson (1950), Elliot Liebow (1967), Oscar Lewis (1963) and Robert Coles (1964-1978). These observers were not "uninvolved," but did establish parameters to their involvement.

Social policy must be informed by both research and advocacy, but the reasonable distinctions between the two must be maintained. Applied research is dependent upon actual social problems for generating and defining its subjects of inquiry, yet requires that researchers maintain a disciplined and empathic stance towards their work. They must know and make clear to their

audience whether they are writing as researchers or as advocates. With respect to the problems of street children, the early work of documentary photographer and writer Jacob Riis (1890) provides an example. Riis addressed the social problems of New York City's "Street Arabs" at the turn-of-the-century in his "magic lantern" shows designed to raise people's passion and consciousness. His work, as well as that of his near contemporary, Lewis Hine (1907), took a sympathetic stance of advocacy which was determined to bring about further social action. While the sympathetic stance may serve as an important tool in the work of the policy advocate concerned with generating the passion that plays a role in social action, it is a liability in applied research. Advocacy based upon sympathy is not a sufficient base upon which to build effective social policy.

Summary

The existence of street children appears to be a cross-cultural phenomenon. The dimensions of this serious social problem in the developing countries is beginning to be recognized and the need for social action addressed. However, recent policy papers reflect a vulnerability of the helping professions in adopting a sympathetic, rather than empathic stance toward social problems. Policymakers must rely on researchers, clinicians and advocates alike to inform policy formulation, yet the approach of each requires careful scrutiny. One's frame of reference is demonstrated in tone, attitude and use of language. It shades the way issues are conceptualized, the methods used in their study and, ultimately, impacts directly on the social policy that

results. The sympathetic stance, based upon conscious or unconscious identification, is prone to distortion and misrepresentation. In regard to street children, this failure to achieve empathic understanding has resulted in a focus on weakness and pathology at the expense of recognizing signs of strength and resiliency these children also display. The sympathetic posture embodied in recent papers has falsely assumed a great deal of knowledge of these children. Adoption of an arrogant, sympathetic stance will take us further from achieving any genuine understanding of street children; in turn, a lack of demonstrated empathy in social action programs will most likely prove self-defeating. Serious confusion between the roles of advocacy on the one hand and applied research on the other has blurred the complexity of this problem and runs the risk of generating social policy that is both short-sighted and counter-productive. The personal "transformation" the Colombian Gamins speak of is a central goal of social policy. It is a process that comes from within the child and belongs to him. Achievement and maintenance of empathic understanding is built upon respect. It is fundamentally different than "help" based on sympathy, which is dictated or imposed. Their words -- `brother, give me your hand' -- offer insight to those of us in the helping professions - researchers, clinicians, advocates and policymakers, alike.

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